

# Research intelligence: the perils of returning home for fieldwork

Reverse culture shock is among the tricky situations that scholars may face when returning to their native country for research fieldwork, says Olga Burlyuk

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By [Olga Burlyuk](#)

There are many guides on doing fieldwork in foreign countries, but few researchers ever comment on what is often a more fraught task: returning to one's home nation to conduct research.

As a political scientist, I've been based outside my native Ukraine since my doctoral studies. Most recently, I have worked in Belgium studying the "political elites" within the European Union headquarters in Brussels.

But I also examine the links between the EU and Ukraine, so I have regularly returned to Kiev over the past 10 years. While working in Washington DC, Westminster or Brussels has its challenges, doing research in Ukraine is always a more emotionally charged undertaking.

Why? At face value, it should be easier. I understand the cultural and political context, speak the local language, have a social network that can help secure access and know my way around.

What you are unlikely to hear from anyone when preparing for your "fieldwork trip home", however, is that you may be dramatically overestimating your familiarity with your home country, and that it will have biases against you.

At the most general level, you need to brace yourself for reverse culture shock. You may find certain practices less obvious, intuitive or commonsensical than you did before. You may also catch yourself uncomfortably settled in an observer role, becoming more of a visitor than a homecomer.

Adapting to the work culture of your home country can also be a shock. Many fresh graduates move abroad for their postgraduate education without ever having worked in their home countries, but they still assume a certain level of knowledge about professional life there.

However, some hierarchies are often not immediately apparent, while mundane things such as dress code, preferred means of communication and how to schedule meetings may also be dramatically different.

In Brussels, for instance, I generally contact people by email and well in advance so as to schedule a meeting for a specific time slot months away. In Kiev, I often contact people by

email long before my field trip only to get a brisk reply with the person's mobile phone number and an invitation to get in touch once I am actually in town. "Six months is long-term in Ukraine," so the joke goes: things tend to change quickly, and planning months ahead is pointless.

Gender expectations in your country of origin can often differ from those in your current country of residence. In my case, sexism seems more tolerated in Ukraine than in Belgium.

I remember buying myself high-heeled shoes and a laptop-size leather handbag "to look decent and be taken at all seriously" on one of my early field trips to Ukraine: flat shoes and a backpack simply would not do.

Although I introduce myself as "Dr Burlyuk", interviewees have later referred to me as "Olichka", the diminutive for Olga – which is utterly inappropriate. And there are occasions when men act excessively "gallant", kissing my hand when I'd extended it only for shaking.

These incidents may startle you (as they did me), or you may appreciate them; either way, reflect on this in advance and decide whether to conform, ignore or confront.

Also be prepared to be surprised to discover what people think of you, your current position and your research. I have encountered a wide range of reactions: from admiration for having "secured" a position abroad, appreciation for my research and genuine curiosity about it, to jealousy and outright contempt for what I am seen to represent ("a traitor to the country", I was once told).

For while you are likely to see yourself as an insider, people in the field may well consider you an outsider. It may come as a heavy blow, and you ought to prepare for it mentally and practically. For instance, how would you reply in one of these difficult situations without jeopardising your fieldwork interview?

Last but not least, depending on whether you will be staying with or close to family and friends, be prepared to fend off some of their enthusiasm and set up a clear separation with the work part of your trip. Seeing your loved ones may be an upside or a downside. Either way, it is an extra emotional load to carry.

My main piece of advice for preparing for fieldwork, especially if you are going to your country of origin, is to take as little as possible for granted.

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